What Is Democratic Socialism?

DSA Night School

The phrase "democratic socialism" is indeed everywhere in the news these days.

Rep. Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, Sen. Bernie Sanders, and Sen. Julia Salazar have claimed the label. Meanwhile, the Democratic Socialists of America has seen its membership explode from 6,000 in summer 2016 to more than 55,000 two years later, and the political establishment doesn't quite know what to make of it all.

The readings below will help explain why democratic socialism has dramatically increased in popularity since 2016 and dispel common myths and misconceptions about democratic socialism.

What Is Democratic Socialism?

- What is Democratic Socialism?, Neal Meyer, Jacobin
- Democratic socialism, explained by a democratic socialist, Meagan Day, Vox
- Musings on the Meaning of Democratic Socialism, Matt Bruenig, People's Policy Project
- Towards Freedom: Democratic Socialist Theory and Practice, Joseph Schwartz and Michael Shulman, Democratic Socialists of America

Why "Progressive" Isn't Enough

- Why We're Socialists, Not "Progressives", Natasha Fernández-Silber, Jacobin
- Why the Differences Between Sanders and Warren Matter, Zaid Jilani, Jacobin
- Elizabeth Warren Can and Should Do Better on Foreign Policy, Sarah Lazare, Jacobin
- Sanders's Speech Presents a Conundrum for New Left's Socialist Strategy, Ashley Smith, Truthout
- Defining Democratic Socialism, Curt Ries, Common Dreams
- Accountable Capitalism or Democratic Socialism?, Stephen Maher, Jacobin

Critique of Capitalism

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We all live under the exploitative economic system known as capitalism, but what are its internal contradictions and how can we overcome it?

Critique of Capitalism

- The Theory of Value and Surplus Value, Ernest Mandel, An Introduction to Marxist Economic Theory
- Historical Materialism, Frederich Engels, Socialism: Utopian and Scientific
- Capital and Capitalism, Ernest Mandel, An Introduction to Marxist Economic Theory
- Chapter 8, Karl Marx, Wage Labor and Capital
- Chapter 9, Karl Marx,Wage Labor and Capital
- Why We Need Socialism in America, Michael Harrington, Dissent
- But at Least Capitalism Is Free and Democratic, Right?, Erik Olin Wright, Jacobin: A short response to capitalist writer Milton Friedman, in which Wright argues that capitalism is in direct conflict with the exercise of human freedom.
- How to Be an Anti-Capitalist for the 21st Century, chapters 1 and 2, Erik Olin Wright: These chapters provide an introductory examination and critique of the capitalist system. Wright argues that capitalism, by its very nature, is incompatible with the ethical values of equality, freedom, and community.
- Where Despots Rule, Elizabeth Anderson, Jacobin: An interview with political philosopher Elizabeth Anderson about her book *Private Government.* In that book, Anderson argues that the workplace constitutes a "private government" in which workers are subject to the dictatorial will of their bosses.
- Understanding Capital: Marx's Economic Theory, chapters 2–4, Duncan K. Foley: A summary of some of the basics of Marx's critique of capitalism.

Capitalism and the State

DSA Night School

How do capitalism and the state interact? What support does the state lend to capitalism, and how does capitalism rely on this support to reproduce itself? These readings help lay out the terrain of struggle for socialists and how to confront our class enemies inside and outside of the state.

Capitalism and the State

- The State and Society, Hal Draper, Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution: Volume I
- State Power and Class Interests, Ralph Miliband, New Left Review
- Isn't America Already Kind of Socialist?, Chris Maisano, Jacobin

- Lenin's The State and Revolution, Ralph Milliband, Socialist Register
- The Ruling Class Does Not Rule, Fred Block, Socialist Revolution
- The State System and the State Elite, Ralph Miliband, "The State in a Capitalist Society": In this brief excerpt, Miliband provides a definition of the state system of liberal capitalist regimes.
- The Market as Prison, Charles Lindblom, The Journal of Politics: Despite the fact that capitalists often do not directly control the government, their structural position in the economy allows them to effectively veto policies that run contrary to their interests, as Lindblom argues in this essay.
- Social Democracy is Good. But Not Good Enough, Joseph M. Schwartz and Bhaskar Sunkara, Jacobin: Socialists want maximal democracy and freedom, and for that reason are not content with a kinder, gentler capitalism. But, as Schwartz and Sunkara argue, even if we were happy with a reformed capitalism, reforms which significantly set back capitalist interests are impossible to maintain.
- The Many Lives of François Mitterrand, Jonah Birch, Jacobin: In 1981, French Socialist Party candidate François Mitterrand came to power with a left-wing majority in parliament and a promise to inaugurate a "French road to socialism." But within two years, Mitterand's radical ambitions were shattered and the Socialist Party was implementing a program of austerity. Birch recounts this saga in detail and blames the socialist failure on an unwillingness to mobilize popular support and fight for more radical social change.
- Capitalism and the State (video), Vivek Chibber: Chibber describes three ways in which states in capitalist society are fundamentally biased in favor of capitalists: in the class composition of occupants of political office, in the financial influence capitalists exert on the political process, and—most importantly—in the structural power capitalists hold over the economy.
- The Paradox of Social Democracy: The American Case, Robert Brenner, Verso Books: In this three-part essay, Brenner identifies the pitfalls of social democracy by detailing the failures of socialist attempts to achieve significant reform through the Democratic Party.

Socialist Strategy

DSA Night School

Capitalism is an inherently unsustainable economic system, yet past socialist movements have are always met with fierce resistance from capital. These readings offer a historical and material analysis of how we can learn from these outcomes and persevere.

Socialist Strategy

- What Should Socialists Do?, Joseph Schwartz and Bhaskar Sunkara, Jacobin
- The Rise and Fall of the Second International, Sean Larson, Jacobin
- The Problem of Reformism, Robert Brenner, Against the Current
- Beyond Social Democracy, Ralph Miliband and Marcel Liebman, Socialist Register
- Building a Mass Socialist Party, Sam Gindin, Jacobin
- Our Road to Power, Vivek Chibber, Jacobin
- The Left in Government — A Strategic Project, Asbjørn Wahl, Socialist Project
- What Strategy for the US Left, Charlie Post, Jacobin
- Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained, Vivek Chibber, Jacobin
- Why Socialists Support Jovanka and Gayle, Mike Parker, East Bay DSA
- Socialize the Banks, Nuno Teles, Jacobin
- There's Always Another Crisis, Meagan Day, Jacobin
- "New Labour's Boom and Bust," Dawn Foster, Jacobin
- "Labour's Socialist Realism," Luke Savage, Jacobin
- "Another Britain Is Possible," Grace Blakely, Tribune
- "Generation Jezza," Marcus Barnett, Jacobin
- "In and Against the State," Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, Red Pepper
- "The Corbyn Project," Robin Blackburn, New Left Review

Neoliberalism and Imperialism

DSA Night School

What exactly are neoliberalism and imperialism? Are they different from capitalism? What are their origins and their effects? These readings provide definitions of neoliberalism and imperialism through historical insight and examples of these ideologies at work.

Capitalism and Dispossession

- How Will Capitalism End?, Wolfgang Streeck, New Left Review
- Neoliberalism Is a Political Project, David Harvey, Jacobin
- Accumulation by Dispossession, David Harvey, The New Imperialism
- Superintending Global Capital, Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, New Left Review

What Exactly Is Neoliberalism?

- Words Can't Do the Work for Us, Julia Ott, Dissent
- On Neoliberalism, David Harvey (interview), Monthly Review
- Neoliberalism's Deadly Experiment, Josiah Rector, Jacobin

- Unmaking Global Capitalism, Sam Gindin, Jacobin

The 2008 Financial Crisis and Its Aftermath

- The Austerity of the Obama Years, Mike Konczal, Dissent
- Who Caused the Great Crash of 2008?, Lee Sustar, Socialist Worker
- Ten Theses on the Crisis, Albo, Panitch, and Gindin, In and Out of Crisis

History and Theory of Imperialism

- Excerpts from In the Ruins of the Present: Tricontinental Working Document, Vijay Prashad, Tricontinental
- Imperialism in the Twenty-First Century, John Smith, Monthly Review
- Global Capitalism as Imperialist Construct, Esteban Mercatante, Left Voice
- Financial Imperialism: The Case of Venezuela, Jack Rasmus, Counterpunch
- Excerpts from Latin America and the Theory of Imperialism, Eduardo Galeano, Monthly Review
- Superintending Global Capitalism, Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, New Left Review

Anti-Imperialist Strategy

- Solidarity isn't a slogan, it's a process, Conversation with Vijay Prashad, Monthly Review Online
- Bay Area Longshore Workers Fought Against Apartheid, Peter Cole, FoundSF
- Social Democracy at Home Requires Anti-Imperialism Abroad, Interview with Aziz Rana, Jacobin
- Ending Economic Conscription, Meagan Day, Jacobin
- No Room for Debate, Daniel Finn, Jacobin
- "I Did My Best to Stop American Foreign Policy", Interview with Bernie Sanders, Sydney Ember, New York Times

Class, Race, and Gender

DSA Night School

These readings example how class intersects with racial and gender oppression, how these divisions benefit capital, and how socialists have fought against these oppressions through the years.

Class Struggle: The Motor of History

- Why the Working Class?, Vivek Chibber, Jacobin
- Uniting the Dispossessed, Bryan Palmer, Jacobin
- Class Analysis, Eric Olin Wright, Class Matters

Capitalism, Class, and the Left Today

- Back to Marx, Ellen Meiksins Wood, Monthly Review
- Politics Without Politics, Chris Maisano, Jacobin
- Why Class Struggle Is Central, Ellen Meiksins Wood, "Against the Grain"

Race and Class

- The Social Construction of Race, Brian Jones, Jacobin
- Socialism and Black Oppression, Paul Heideman, Jacobin
- A "Freedom Budget" for All Americans, The March on Washington Organizers
- The Political Economy of Racism (chapter 7, excerpt), Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, "From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation"

How Socialists Can Dismantle the US Police State

- It's Not Just the Drug War, Maria Gottschalk (interview), Jacobin
- Did Liberals Give Us Mass Incarceration?, Adaner Usmani, Catalyst
- America Is Waking Up to the Injustice of Cash Bail, Bryce Covert, The Nation
- Modern Day Debtors' Prisons, Meagan Day and Bhaskar Sunkara, The New York Times

Socialism and Gender Oppression

- Gender and the Communist Manifesto, Stephanie Coontz, Solidarity
- Capitalism's Crisis of Care, Sarah Leonard and Nancy Fraser, Dissent
- The Pitfalls of Radical Feminism, Erica West, Jacobin
- The Feminist Case for Single Payer, Natalie Shure, Jacobin
- A Blueprint for Universal Childhood, Megan Erickson, Jacobin
- Cockblocked by Redistribution, Katie J.M. Baker, Dissent
- Why Women Had Better Sex Under Socialism, Kristen R. Ghodese, The New York Times
- A Feminism for Tomorrow: Introduction, Kaavya Asoka and Sarah Leonard, Dissent

Martin Luther King, Jr.: Democratic Socialist

- The Forgotten Socialist History of Martin Luther King Jr., Matthew Miles Goodrich, In These Times
- Remembering King's roots in labor and socialist movements of the 20th century, Nathan Newman, Monthly Review Online
- The Legacy of Martin Luther King, Lee Sustar, Socialist Worker
- Nonviolence and Social Change, Martin Luther King, Jr., Lecture in 1967
- Programs and Prospects, Martin Luther King, Jr., Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?

Social Reproduction and Capitalism

- What Is Social Reproduction Theory?, Tithi Bhattacharya, Socialist Worker
- Contradictions of Capital and Care, Nancy Fraser, New Left Review
- Caring Enough to Strike: US Teachers' Strikes in Perspective, Tithi Bhattacharya, Rebel
- Caring in the City, Johanna Brenner, Jacobin
- More on the theory of social reproduction: Capital, Labor Power, and Gender Relations, Susan Ferguson and David McNally, Introduction to Lise Vogel, Marxism and the Oppression of Women: A Unitary Theory
- Social reproduction, migration, and the global labor supply chain: Precarious Migrants: Gender, Race, and the Social Reproduction of a Global Working Class, Susan Ferguson and David McNally, Socialist Register

Labor History

DSA Night School

Any analysis of socialism would be incomplete without a history of labor. Labor struggles in previous years, both successes and failures, provide valuable lessons for future struggles.

Labor History

- The Forgotten Militants, Charlie Post, Jacobin
- The Study of American Labor, Kim Moody, Jacobin
- Reviving Labor from Below, Kim Moody, Jacobin
- Beyond Social Movement Unionism, Sam Gindin, Jacobin